

NALAYANI: AN IMMORTAL SAGA OF FEMININITY AND FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Certain women in literature have never failed to intrigue us. The nuances of their personality, the myriad shades of their characters, the things they say and they do, everything about them paves the wave for their glory, and for the kind of fame which lasts not only for one lifetime but goes on to inspire generations and generations of women after them. What they leave behind is a legacy, a legacy of good deeds, good thoughts, brave acts. One such character - maybe not so well known, maybe not so extensively written about - is Nalayani from the Mahabharata, who is known to be the quintessential 'pativrata' woman of the Indian society. Nalayani is the ideal doting wife to a husband, who is handicapped and depends on her for all his needs, yet treats her harshly. And yet, she serves him with all her mind, heart, body and soul, going to the extent of carrying his broken weak feeble form to the brothel for the fulfilment of his physical pleasures. This paper highlights why this woman is not only a doting quintessential wife, 'pativrata', but is also an epitome of feminism. This paper highlights both, femininity and feminism, in the character of Nalayani.

KEYWORDS: Nalayani, Wife, Responsibility, Femininity & Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

Nalayani: An Immortal Saga of Femininity and Feminism

Certain women in literature have never failed to intrigue us. The nuances of their personality, the myriad shades of their characters, the things they say and they do, everything about them paves the wave for their glory and for the kind of fame which lasts not only for one lifetime but goes on to inspire generations and generations of women after them. What they leave behind is a legacy, a legacy of good deeds, good thoughts, brave acts. We find such women right in the beginning of recorded literature: Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* - ferocious, brave, determine; Judith, from the eponymous book in the Bible, who temporarily casts off the role of femininity society wants her to play and enters the camp of the Assyrians attacking her city and beheads the enemy general, Holofernes; and so many others like them. We find them in literature through all stages and ages across the globe. Antigone, so dedicated towards her family, going against royalty to give her brother a decent burial, all though he had been declared a traitor to the nation. Clytemnestra, for the way she avenges the death of her daughter in the hands of her husband. Portia, in the *The Merchant of Venice* for her sheer wit and presence of mind and the way she wins not just the case for Antonio but also wins our respect and our hearts; Juliet, for all the love and affection she freely expresses in *Romeo and Juliet*. Viola, in *The Twelfth Night*, so beautiful a woman, yet so different when she camouflages herself as a man and serves the duke, Orsino. Draupadi, one single woman who brought calamity on everybody who had done wrong to her and with her. Sita, who brings up her two children alone in the forest after being deserted by her husband; to name a few. These characters have never failed to amaze us or rouse admiration in us with their beauty, their courage, and the sheer force of their personalities. It's like a legacy that

they have left behind, which has survived for all the generations after them and will survive for all the generations to come. One such character - maybe not so well known, maybe not so extensively written about - is Nalayani from the *Mahabharata*, who is known to be the quintessential 'pativrata' woman of the Indian society. Nalayani is the ideal doting wife to a husband, who is handicapped and depends on her for all his needs, yet treats her harshly. And yet, she serves him with all her mind, heart, body and soul, going to the extent of carrying his broken weak feeble form to the brothel for the fulfilment of his physical pleasures. This paper highlights why this woman is not only a doting quintessential wife, 'pativrata', but is also an epitome of feminism. This paper highlights both, femininity and feminism, in the character of Nalayani.

In India, almost every woman believes that life is a sacred responsibility, and her role as a partner to her man, and a parent to her child, is a pious obligation. Women across generations have been tutored to strongly believe in self-sacrifice for the betterment of her family. Therefore, women generally have had no qualms about setting aside her dreams, for her duties and responsibilities and for the benefit and welfare of all the others around her. However, the fact that she can take such tough decisions, which primarily involves her to say goodbye to her own wishes and desires, and is inspired by her indomitable inner strength and spirit, is rarely acknowledged in our society.

In recent times, much has been said about feminism and women empowerment in various contexts. However, even in this modern society, feminism, to many, means recording the percentage of female Corporate Directors or facilitating laws to motivate women-owned businesses and calculating the growth in women's contribution to the economy of the country. It cannot be refuted that these are definitely important parameters and indexes to track women empowerment in a developing nation as ours; but feminism, in its true sense, ought to concern itself with the freedom to discover a woman's innate humanness; to be able to acknowledge her femininity, to be true to her inherent instincts, and to be able to follow her dreams and desires. Women should not adhere to the society's diktat of what it is feminine and befits a woman but they should explore their latent potentialities and through self-introspection learn to define themselves. It has often been argued that the society's edict pertaining to the conduct of women has been influenced greatly by the portrayal of women in the epics especially *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*.

While analysing the gender roles in the epics, it becomes imperative to bear in mind the orientation of the primary authors, the individuals who interpret them and facilitate their transmission and more importantly, whether a selective reading has been encouraged to portray and establish a subordinate or distorted picture of the women. Often it has been argued that the present subordinate status of women in the society can be traced back to the prominent women characters depicted in the epics and these gender roles ought to be perpetuated and protected by the patriarchy. This paper strongly argues that epics and narratives are open to several interpretations and the patriarchal analysis of these strong women characters does not do justice to the myriads of layers suggested in the delineation of these powerful women. One such woman is Nalayani in the *Mahabharata*.

The reference of Nalayani comes in *Mahabharata* after Arjuna has won Draupadi, and just before the five Pandava brothers wed her, to respect the words of their mother Kunti. VedVyasa, the great saint and seer, tells the tale of Nalayani (Draupadi in her previous birth) to the grieving father, King Drupada, who finds it extremely painful to accept the fact that his darling daughter should be wedded to five men. Vyasathen recounts that Draupadi, in her previous birth, Nalayani had been married to Maudgalya who had transformed himself to a loathsome old leper in order to test the virtue of his beautiful wife. A woman of impeccable virtue, Nalayani served her husband with unflinching devotion and love, in

spite of being ill-treated by him. One day while eating, his rotten thumb fell into the food and as was her habit, Nalayani ate the leftover from her husband's plate without an iota of loathing or repulsion. Impressed with such an act of devotion, Maudgalya came to his original form of a handsome young man and granted Nalayani a boon. An overjoyed Nalayani expresses the wish that her husband give her sexual pleasures in every imaginable way taking five different forms. Thereafter, Maudgalya and Nalayani move in the celestial worlds and in the ashramas of different sages and consummate their desires infinitely assuming different forms. Nalayani was so engrossed in the Brahmin Maudgalya that her soul had become one with him and her desire for her man increased with every passing day. However, her world came crashing down one day when her husband lost interest in the worldly pleasures they had been enjoying and decided to abandon her in pursuit of Brahma-yoga. Nalayani vociferously opposed this treatment meted out to her saying that she was not completely satisfied with the sexual pleasures and wanted far more from Maudgalya. The sage, furious by what he considered her shamelessness, chided her for openly expressing her desires which is unbecoming of a woman and accused her of being an obstacle in his path of salvation. Thereafter he presages that Nalayani would be reborn as a princess of repute and would have five distinguished men as her husbands with whom she could savour the pleasures of sex. However, critics have frequently and pointedly emphasised the very fact that the Brahmin assuming the form of a loathsome, old leper to test the virtue of his wife is questionable. This attribute seems to have been conditioned by the prevalent norms of the society that places the responsibility of verifying, confirming and protecting the chastity and virtue of the woman in the hands of the patriarchy.

The metaphors used to describe the couple while they enjoy the corporeal pleasures always positions Maudgalya as the phallic authority – the example-par-excellence is the transformation of the sage to the mountain (a veritable phallic image) and Nalayani to the river flowing beneath it. The crucial event depicting the severing of the thumb also carries a profound significance, given the importance of this particular motif in the *Mahabharata* itself. Eklavya's sacrifice of the thumb is in turn a willing sacrifice of authority – the thumb being the organ that manoeuvres the arrow and lays claim to the masculine vigour. The severance of the thumb does not, however elicit a response of resistance from Nalayani. These are the actions which guarantee her fidelity. In other words, her fidelity is guaranteed through her silence – especially in these situations which could have elicited an assertive response from her. In a Nietzschean scheme of things, therefore, these silences depict the embedding of virtue in a condition that affirms the will to power of the Brahmin male subject that emerges as the primary driving force to acquire the highest possible position in his life. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak makes it clear at the very introduction of her famous essay 'Can the subaltern speak?' that affirmation or resistance through affirmation often carries its own whiff of patronization. Thus Nalayani's silence may be interpreted as a vehement expression of her condescending attitude towards her fate that has subjected her to these ordeal and an exquisite example of tremendous strength of mind to rise above all the adversities in her life with dignity. The question remains – will such a mode of equivocation for a certain sexual identity be a social panacea for those who by virtue of their social identity can only situate themselves at a distance from the political centre of power. These instances, therefore elucidate the problem involved in monolithically conceiving the idea of the 'Woman' or the 'Man' solely in terms of the discursive parameter of gender.

The time when the reference to Nalayani's narrative is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* is also quite relevant, that is, placed between the wedding of Arjuna and Draupadi, and the one which marks the moment of her division of sexual fidelity among five men (among the Pandavas). This carries a significance in terms of depicting the recurrence of particular social conditions. As Vyas explains to Dhrupada, the circumstances leading to Draupadi's second birth, we find that Lord

Rudra had ultimately created a certain provision for Draupadi in terms of her sexual and social fidelity.

Appeased with her severe penances, Lord Rudra grants Nalayani a boon that she shall regain her virginity repeatedly even after enjoying the physical pleasures with her five husbands. The insertion of this episode prior to the second instance of such a divided fidelity (in the Pandava household) establishes a continuity between the past and the present in terms of depicting the provision accorded to the privileged subject who gains her fidelity in terms of her class situation and who holds on to the same by showcasing this fidelity.

All these further hints at the difference of assertive positions of female subjects in the postcolonial space. The demarcations between the centre and the periphery predominates here as is highlighted by the relative standard of dismissal of the Other in events such as pride walk and pride march undertaken in the urban metropole. This however does not assume a naïve standard of demarcation between the empowered male and the powerless female subject. Instead, it focusses on the differential impact of the already restrictive and prohibitory nature of the Law on the interpellated Male and Female subjects. This points to variations in the degrees of interpellation of the two kinds of subjects of the Law. Also, the narrative in the Mahabharata, we are told, is a rendition of the tale by Vyasa. Thus all characters are subjects of representations which, as Spivak shows, bears the partial imprint of replacement and silencing of the voice of the Other. Hence, while Maudgalya's action of renouncement of worldly pleasures is an instance of conformity with the tradition that lays down the rules of spiritual contentment, we are not quite certain of the personal outlook of the man towards this aspect of the Law. Thus Maudgalya causes to suspend the divine will in order to exercise his infinite will in Kierkegaardian sense and emerges as on the interpellated subject of the Law. Maudgalya perhaps achieves transcendence in the midst of the finite by resigning himself to the impossibility of achieving his desires while simultaneously believing that God will give to him his desire in its entirety.

However, the fundamental difference between his conformity and that expected of a woman like Nalayani lies in the fact that while the former can pursue the Law through a wide range of activities (cumulatively called 'tapas') the latter is denied this. The woman faces the brunt of the decision taken by the man always motivated by his own interests and desires. She is always expected to shift her priorities in life to conform to the desires of the man, as if her existence on this earth is merely to facilitate the comforts and wish fulfilment of man. Thus the woman is expected to exercise 'silence' alone as the ideal path of Virtue. This is precisely the aspect of the Law to which Nalayani refuses to conform. She prays to Lord Rudra for the fulfilment of her corporeal needs irrespective of her husband's desires, and in speaking out of her sexual urges, she refuses to observe this characteristic silence expected of her or for that matter, of any other woman. She blatantly refuses to renounce her worldly pleasures conforming to the diktat of renunciation of sexual desires by her husband. In her prayers for sexual fulfilment to Lord Rudra she emerges as a paragon of gender and resistance.

To cite a reference from popular culture in recent times, AparnaSen's film *GoynarBaksho* (The Box of Jewels) brings to light the character of a widow who is denied the fulfilment of her sexual desires following the demise of her aged husband, and who, in a conspicuous blend of humour and high seriousness, appears as a spirit (after her death) to articulate her suppressed desires and grievances over the male members of her family. Although she denies the power to claim her desires in her lifetime, the cinematic portrayal of the character as an aged widow seems to emphasise the question of age that has been discussed earlier and the relationship of the prohibitory impulse of the Law to the temporal aspect of Life. The fact that the character in concern speaks openly about sexual desire as the aged widow remains a radical image in its own right, more so because of her circumstances and the stage in her life in which she is represented when she makes these

articulations.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus the overt question of assertion of female subjectivity seems to be well provisioned in the narrative of Nalayani in the Mahabharata. It is these provisions that enhance the position of the subject who might lay a claim on making such an assertion, while enabling one to locate particular resonances of this position in modern, cultural and social life with its diverse and different fields and positions of the operation of subjectivity. Nalayani like Draupadi represent those women who have emerged as powerful, with strong abilities to assert themselves and directing the course of events that have decided the fate of generations to follow. In spite of our social and cultural advancements, even in modern times we are languishing in a society that is generous in calling women 'sluts' and 'prostitutes' if they talk about their sexual desires and urges. Common opinions about female sexuality range from accusing women of being prudish or withholding of sex to being seductive and using their sexuality as a source of power or manipulation. These skewed views steer us away from seeing the reality that, just like men, women have a natural and a healthy desire to be sexual. When a woman gives up her sexuality, she sacrifices an essential part of who she is. It's not just about having sex, but about being acknowledged and acknowledging of her full self, her physicality, and her wants. Failing to recognize or repressing this part of ourselves can have serious consequences. Every person must feel they can accept themselves and their whole identity. If you are cut off from such an essential feeling, you become less alive and less you. That is why it is so important to debunk the myths about a women's sexuality and allow every individual to live freely as their fullest selves.

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